

Book Review

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***Contextualising the COVID Pandemic in India: A Development Perspective*, Indrani Gupta and Mausumi Das (Eds.), Springer, 2023, Singapore.**

Contextualising the COVID Pandemic in India: A Development Perspective edited by Indrani Gupta and Mausumi Das presents an important examination of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on India's socio-economic landscape. It brings together scholars across disciplines—economics, healthcare, social science, and public policy—each providing critical perspectives on the developmental challenges posed by the pandemic. By addressing specific impacts across important sectors, the volume foregrounds the immediate disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the broader, more enduring structural issues exacerbated by the crisis. Collectively, the contributors argue that the pandemic laid bare India's underlying vulnerabilities and systemic inequalities, particularly affecting labour, healthcare, education, and public trust in governance.

India's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the unique challenges of managing a crisis within a highly diverse, densely populated emerging economy. Gupta and Das's introductory framework sets the context for examining the pandemic as a health crisis and a developmental disruption with long-term implications for India. The initial economic shock, for instance—a sharp 5.7 per cent contraction in GDP during the 2020–21 fiscal year—revealed the vulnerability of India's informal labour market and the limitations of existing welfare mechanisms. This analysis highlights a need for more targeted fiscal policies that support vulnerable workers and sectors, particularly those excluded from formal economic protections. The initial and residual economic fallout, especially for informal labourers and low-wage earners, poses pressing questions about how India can better address systemic inequality in future crisis management.

A significant portion of the volume is dedicated to India's healthcare infrastructure, focusing on the strain COVID-19 pandemic placed on a system already challenged by underfunding and inequitable access. The chapters by Archana Dang, Mausumi Das, and Indrani Gupta focusing on social vulnerabilities provide some of the most compelling insights into how the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities across social and economic lines. In assessing the healthcare sector's response, the authors emphasise the persistent drawbacks of India's declining infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. This focus is especially relevant for policymakers, as it calls for systemic reforms to improve India's healthcare response capacity in preparation for future health crises. Gupta's chapter that advocates a preventive care model with a strong rural health infrastructure and serves as a compelling roadmap for long-term healthcare reform in India.

The pandemic's impact on social structure is explored with particular attention to how existing inequalities—including those of caste, gender, and geographic location—shaped the experiences of diverse population groups during the crisis. In their analysis, Gupta, Das, and other contributors use data-driven methodologies to examine how marginalised communities faced disproportionately severe impacts, including higher job losses and greater economic insecurity. The pandemic's economic fallout—a sharp 5.7 per cent contraction in GDP in 2020–21—revealed how critical economic vulnerabilities, particularly those affecting the informal labour market, can undermine resilience. A critique of the fiscal and monetary measures—including the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* package implemented to support the economy—foregrounds both the constraints of India's fiscal capacity and the limitations of these measures in alleviating hardship for low-income households, especially those outside formal economic protections. It raises pertinent questions about India's capacity to sustain development goals when faced with such large-scale shocks, highlighting that recovery and resilience require macroeconomic stability and targeted interventions that prioritise the informal and unprotected sectors. For instance, Dalit and tribal communities experienced significant economic instability, while women, who took on increased domestic responsibilities during lockdowns, encountered greater job insecurity. The discussions also underscore the importance of inclusive policies that account for intersectional vulnerabilities at the policy design stage. The authors suggest that in neglecting such inclusive considerations, policy responses risk leaving vulnerable groups behind and exacerbating social inequalities that undermine collective recovery. If India is to progress toward resilient and inclusive growth, it must ensure that development strategies prioritise the needs and protections of marginalised groups.

Labour market disruptions are another key theme of the book, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by India's informal and youth labour segments. The chapters by Rosa Abraham and Mrinalini Jha present an empirically rich discussion on how the COVID-19 pandemic destabilised India's workforce particularly for young informal workers, who experienced higher job loss rates, wage reduction, and poor working conditions. They argue that this instability has profound implications for the economic futures of younger workers, since the lack of social protections leaves them particularly vulnerable to ongoing and future shocks. This is especially relevant given the predominance of informal employment within India's economy. Without robust protections and inclusive labour policies, the country's economic recovery will remain fragile and incomplete.

Educational inequalities are also highlighted as a key concern. J. B. G Tilak's chapter on the educational impact of COVID-19 highlights how the pandemic's shift to online learning accentuated existing educational inequalities, primarily through the digital divide. Rural and low-income students, already at a disadvantage, faced greater challenges in accessing digital resources, further widening the gap in educational attainment. In urging policies focusing on digital inclusion, the volume calls attention to the broader developmental risks posed by educational inequality. Without concerted efforts to bridge the digital divide, future crises may continue to disproportionately impact disadvantaged students, ultimately affecting human capital development and economic opportunity in India's poorest regions.

Another recurrent theme throughout the volume is the critical role of public trust in crisis management, particularly in public health initiatives such as vaccination. Vaccine hesitancy, especially in rural areas, emerges as a case study of the importance of trust-building and culturally informed public health communication. Sneha Shashidhara, Sharon Barnhardt, and Shagata Mukherjee's exploration of vaccine hesitancy in rural India attributes this reluctance to entrenched mistrust in government and healthcare providers, emphasising the need for transparent, community-oriented engagement. They point to the necessity of understanding social dynamics in health interventions and argue that building trust is essential for managing the immediate crisis and fostering long-term public engagement in health initiatives. While the discussion is specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine hesitancy serves as a broader lesson in the role of trust in public health and the social cohesion essential for effective governance.

Methodologically, Gupta and Das's volume is marked by its integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Various chapters draw from government surveys, statistical analyses, and case studies and employ an interdisciplinary approach that combines insights from economics, sociology, healthcare, and public policy. This diverse methodological integration allows for an improved understanding of the pandemic's impacts, which continues to reshape India's development trajectory. By synthesising these interdisciplinary perspectives, the editors provide an analytical framework that reveals the complex interplay of social and economic factors, situating the pandemic within the larger context of India's developmental landscape.

While the 14 chapters provide an insightful analysis, there are areas where further exploration would have helped. The mental health impacts of the pandemic, especially among the youth, for example, are briefly acknowledged, yet this is an area with profound social implications that merit a detailed exploration. Additionally, a comparative analysis of India's response relative to other emerging economies could contextualise the national strategies and outcomes within a broader global framework, highlighting both unique challenges and potential areas for cross-national learning. Such comparative perspectives would have helped to better understand how other regions with similar socioeconomic challenges have navigated the challenges thrown up by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This volume will be helpful for academics, policymakers, educators, and development practitioners, offering a thorough examination of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact and a forward-looking perspective on building a resilient, equitable society. It is a call for a reimagined future, where public health, social equity, and economic stability are core to India's pursuit of inclusive growth in the post-pandemic world.